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ABSTRACT

Aspects of dominant and submissive sex role behaviors in preschool children and their teachers during conversation at the snack table were examined in three experiments. Experiment 1 was intended to determine whether the number of times children interrupted their teacher and the teacher interrupted children differed according to the sex of the child. In the subsequent experiments, researchers investigated whether girls or boys were assigned more frequently to the privileges of passing the snack and replenishing it. In the first study, 9 boys and 9 girls 4 years of age were observed while they talked with a variety of student teachers at the snack table. Checklists of the number of teacher/child, child/teacher interruptions during conversation were kept. In the second and third studies, tallies of the number of times boys and girls assumed the dominant roles of passing and replenishing snacks were kept. Results indicated that during conversation, boys interrupted teachers more frequently than girls did. Teachers interrupted girls more frequently than they interrupted boys. There were no significant differences in the frequency of participation by boys and girls in passing or replenishing snacks. Results are discussed in relation to the teacher's role in teaching dominant and submissive sex role behaviors to children. (RH)

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Do Actions Speak Louder Than Words?

An Effect of the Functional Use of Language on Dominant Sex Role Behavior in Boys and Girls

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Abstract

Although a number of studies document the fact that adult males interrupt females more often than females interrupt males, less is known about whether this behavior is also true of younger boys and girls. This study examined some aspects of dominant/submissive sex role behavior in preschool children and their teachers during conversation at the snack table. It asked whether there was any difference in the number of times girls and boys interrupted their teacher, and whether there was any difference in the number of times the teacher interrupted boys or girls. In succeeding experiments, researchers investigated whether girls or boys were assigned more frequently to the privileges of passing snack and replenishing it.

In Experiment 1 nine boys and nine girls aged four years were observed talking with a variety of student teachers in an actual snack setting, and checklists were kept of the number of teacher/child, child/teacher interruptions during conversation. In Experiments 2 and 3, tallies were kept of the number of times boys and girls assumed the dominant roles of passing and replenishing snack. Results indicated that during conversation, boys interrupted their teachers more frequently than girls did ($p > .03$). Teachers interrupted girls more frequently than they interrupted boys ($p > .02$). No significant differences were found in the

frequency of participation by boys and girls in either passing or replenishing snack. Results are discussed in relation to the teacher's role in teaching dominant/submissive sex role behaviors to children.

In the past few years considerable attention has been paid to developing non-sexist curriculum in early childhood classrooms. For example books by Derman-Sparks (1989), Neugebauer (1987) and Sprung (1975) have provided concerned teachers with many practical ideas for implementing that point of view. These recommendations have ranged from suggestions concerning appropriate activities to discussions of ways to alter attitudes of both children and the adults who teach them.

As a result of this work, much progress has already taken place. Many schools now encourage all children to participate in all activities and are careful to provide role models of wholesome attitudes that widen children's perception of appropriate sex roles and potential career possibilities.

Despite this progress, however, much remains to be accomplished in more subtle areas of sex-role related behavior. One of the areas that warrants further research has to do with the functional use of language. Students of functional language are less interested in what people say--the content of language--and are more interested in the process of how people use it. For example, this study did not analyze whether the teachers used non-sexist language such as firefighter in place of fireman but studied, instead, the ways teachers used the process of language itself to perpetuate dominant and submissive language behavior in children--and how teachers taught boys and girls to perpetuate those roles, too.

Approaches to this kind of research are based on the theory that individuals must learn far more than correct grammatical forms and phonology when learning to use language. In order to become competent communicators they must also learn the appropriate use of language in various social contexts (Hymes, 1971). That idea has led to what Coates (1988) terms the ethnographic study of language. That is the study of how the way language is used affects social behavior and how social expectations affect the use of language.

The research reported below sought to study one instance of this interplay between language and behavior by investigating whether there was any difference in patterns of conversation between boys and girls and their teachers as they talked together while having snack. More specifically, it asked whether young children of either sex might be learning language related dominant/non-dominant behaviors in that setting.

Some information has already accumulated on the subject of conversational dominance. For example, studies of adults document the fact that adult males interrupt females more often than females interrupt males. In a classic study, Zimmerman and West (1975) reported that within mixed-sex conversations "virtually all the interruptions and overlaps were by the male speakers (98 per cent and 100 per cent, respectively)" (page 115). This finding holds true even when sex role and status are separated and women are in a "power position" as a study by West (1984) entitled "When The Doctor is a Lady" revealed. In that study, West found that women physicians were consistently interrupted by male patients more

frequently than male doctors were. In a more recent study, Woods (1989) confirmed that finding about dominant behavior. She studied conversations between women holding high-status occupational positions speaking with male subordinates. Woods found that "even when the women held high-status occupational positions male subordinates still organized the interaction in a way that allowed them to dominate the floor: for instance, by interrupting more often..." (page 149). Moreover, she reported, women's interruptions failed more often than did the men's. Out of 21 interruptions women actually gained the floor 11 times, while men gained the floor 17 out of a possible 20 instances.

When we turn to studies of conversation between adults and children evidence also exists that parents and teachers treat girls and boys differently. Grief (1980) studied preschool children and their parents in dyadic play situations and found that fathers interrupted their children more than mothers did, and both parents interrupted their daughters more than they did their sons. Grief found no difference in the number of interruptions made by boys and girls, but that study involved only pairs of individuals interacting. Boys and girls were not present at the same time.

In an analysis of mixed sex classroom talk between teachers and children aged eleven and twelve, Swann (1989) reported that boys contributed more to classroom discussion and had more speaking time than girls did. She suggested that was partly due to the teachers looking at the boys more of the time (60% toward boys compared to 40% toward girls in one instance) and partly due to the

teacher and girls "colluding" (her word) in permitting that dominant behavior to take place.

Sachs (1981) studied the role of interruptions more directly by investigating whether preschoolers followed social rules governing politeness when they interrupted conversations. Her study, which looked at children interrupting child/child, adult/child and adult/adult pairs, concluded that preschoolers rarely used polite strategies when breaking into other people's talk. She found no difference in the number of interruptions by boys and girls, but there were only seven boys as compared to eleven girls included and no attempt was made to provide balanced group participation.

These studies, combined with additional ones documenting other non-language related variations in teacher behavior according to the sex of the child (Fagot, 1973, 1981, 1983; Jacklin, 1989; Serbin, Connor & Citron, 1981), raised some interesting research questions about how children learn sex role behaviors from their teachers.

What if preschool boys and girls were placed in a social situation together, how do teachers respond to them during open conversation? Are the teachers impartial or do they (like parents)interrupt little girls more frequently? What might children conclude from that behavior? And how do four-year-old children behave in a balanced, mixed sex group? Who interrupts whom? Are they too young to have established the dominant/submissive language patterns evident in adulthood? Or are

these patterns already present in their behavior? Are there other patterns of sex-role related dominant/submissive behavior evident at the snack table? If so, which sex is dominant? Finally, must research of this sort be done in typical environments that reduce the likelihood of generalizability of results to more typical school situations, or can it be successfully carried out in more ordinary, lifelike settings?

To obtain answers to these questions observations were made of 18 four-year-old children and their teachers while having snack at nursery school.

Experiment 1

Procedure

Subjects: The sample consisted of nine girls and nine boys. All of the children were at least four years of age by September first. All were middle class children attending a half day university laboratory school. All the children and teachers spoke English.

The teachers were third and fourth year women students majoring in early childhood education. All had at least one semester prior experience teaching at the laboratory school. Because the observations were made on various days over a period of 2 months, a total of 15 student teachers were observed talking with the children. The teachers were told that the language behavior of the children was the subject of the observations.

Observers included a professor of early childhood education and two research assistants. Reliability between observers was

calculated according to the following formula:

$$\frac{Agrees}{Agrees + Disagrees} \times 100 = percent\ agreement$$

Reliability ranged from 88% to 100% agreement (Adams and Schvaneveldt, 1985).

Method: Children and teachers were observed at the snack table. The activity was selected for observation because it presented a rare opportunity in that open classroom to obtain a two girl/two boy/one teacher balance, thereby providing each sex with an equal opportunity to participate in conversation and interruptions while involved in a familiar and natural setting. During the time of the study, all children were observed at least four times. Three were observed five times to compensate for absences and maintain the two girl/two boy balance at the tables. In order to avoid repeated pairing of some children, children were initially randomly assigned to the snack groups and rotated so that the composition of groups was not repeated.

(A pilot study taught us we could not depend on the children randomly varying their seating patterns even when they complied with the rule of two boys/two girls. Some children consistently preferred a particular table or special friends. We are indebted to the tact combined with a certain degree of firmness by the Head Teacher, for achieving a random combination of seating during the observations while keeping the children reasonably happy about complying with that requirement.

Nor was it satisfactory to videotape the interactions. Because of the grouping of the subjects around small tables as was typical of snack at that school, all participants' faces could not be filmed simultaneously. The only practical solution to this difficulty was on-the-spot use of check sheets to record the interruptions.)

Check sheet recording began as soon as everyone was seated and continued until the first child left the table. Recording was interrupted whenever the two x two balance was disturbed by a child leaving to get refills, wash hands, and so forth and was resumed when the child returned.

Observers recorded each time the teacher interrupted a boy or girl, and also recorded each time a girl or boy interrupted the teacher. Interruptions were operationally defined as occurring whenever anyone broke into another person's communication before the first person was finished. Only interruptions by children of teachers or teachers by children were recorded.

Results:

Table 1 lists the number of times the teacher interrupted either a boy or a girl while snack was going on during 19 observation episodes. A t-test analysis of these data (Table 2) compared the average number of times the teachers interrupted boys (2.5) with the average number of times they interrupted girls (3.7). The probability for that test was .02, indicating that the teachers interrupted the girls more frequently than they did the boys.

TABLE 1

Number of Interruptions by Teachers of Boys and Girls
During 19 Episodes of Snack

Episode	Boys (N=9)	Girls (N=9)
1	4	6
2	3	3
3	4	7
4	3	5
5	3	2
6	1	6
7	0	2
8	4	3
9	2	2
10	4	3
11	3	3
12	2	3
13	2	3
14	2	4
15	5	4
16	2	6
17	0	1
18	3	4
19	1	3
	48	70

TABLE 2

t-Test Analysis of Frequency of Teachers Interrupting Boys and Girls

Number of Episodes	Gender	Mean	Standard Deviation	t	Degrees of Freedom	Probability
19	F	3.684	1.634			
19	M	2.526	1.389	2.352	36.0	p>.024

Table 3 lists the number of times boys or girls interrupted the teacher during the same conversational period. During 19 observations, boys interrupted the teacher 87 times, and girls interrupted the teacher 59 times. When a t-test was performed on those data, (Table 4), once again the probability at .03 indicated that there was a significant difference in the average number of times boys interrupted teachers compared to the average number of times that girls did.

Experiment 2

Intrigued by the findings above, we asked ourselves if there were other non-language related ways the four-year-old boys were perhaps receiving messages about appropriate dominant behavior. Two possibilities came to mind. The first we identified as "passing snack", the second as "getting snack".

Procedure:

Subjects: Subjects were essentially the same children and teachers described in Experiment 1 with the exception that they were two months older, and the ratio of boys and girls had shifted from nine/nine to eleven girls and ten boys. Assignment of teachers remained the same.

Method: The children were again seated two girls and two boys and a student teacher per observed table. Each child was observed three times during a series of 15 observations. Unlike the first investigation, participants were recorded individually rather than solely by gender.

Recording began as soon as everyone at the table was seated and continued for 15 minutes or until the first child left the table. Recording was interrupted whenever the two

TABLE 3

Number of Interruptions by Boys and Girls of Teachers
During 19 Episodes of Snack

Episode	Boys (N=9)	Girls (N=9)
1	5	5
2	5	1
3	6	8
4	4	6
5	4	3
6	3	2
7	7	5
8	4	1
9	5	2
10	2	0
11	2	2
12	2	3
13	8	2
14	7	1
15	4	2
16	6	5
17	4	1
18	6	6
19	3	4
	87	59

TABLE 4

t-Test Analysis of Frequency of Boys and Girls Interrupting Teachers

Number of Episodes	Gender	Mean	Standard Deviation	t	Degrees of Freedom	Probability
19	F	3.105	2.183			
19	M	4.578	1.773	-2.283	36.0	0.028

x two balance was disrupted by a child going for refills, washing hands, and so forth. All data were collected by one research assistant so reliability checks were not needed to compare interobserver reliability. The activity itself of passing food and materials around the table was obvious and easy to record.

Sometimes children volunteered for the privilege of passing around napkins, cups, and food and drink, and sometimes they did not and were assigned the task. However, the decisions about who would pass the materials was basically determined by the teachers since they were the final arbiters of who did the passing.

Results:

As Table 5 indicates, there was a wide variation between children, some being much more active in passing supplies and food than others were. An inspection of total times of passing-snack (Table 6) revealed there was no difference in the amount of participation by the children since 65 episodes of boys and 66 episodes of girls passing snack were recorded. Therefore no statistical test was needed to confirm this.

Experiment 3

Still another possible measure of dominance that occurred to the investigators remained to be pursued. This was an investigation of whether more girls or boys were sent to get snack refills from the kitchen.

Procedure

Subjects: Because this investigation took place toward the end of the school year, two boys had left for vacation. Therefore the sample included eleven girls and eight boys plus

TABLE 5

Number of Times Individual Children Passed
Snack During 15 Observations

Girls (N=11)		Boys (N=10)	
F 1	5	M 1	7
F 2	4	M 2	7
F 3	10	M 3	12
F 4	15	M 4	4
F 5	5	M 5	11
F 6	9	M 6	9
F 7	4	M 7	11
F 8	2	M 8	4
F 9	9	M 9	0
F 10	3	M 10	0
	66		65

TABLE 6

Number of Times Boys and Girls Passed Snack
During 15 Observed Episodes

Episode	Boys (N=9)	Girls (N=9)
1	5	4
2	3	2
3	1	0
4	2	4
5	5	5
6	0	6
7	3	2
8	5	4
9	5	4
10	4	4
11	4	7
12	9	5
13	5	3
14	9	2
15	5	14
	65	66

the usually assigned variety of teachers. As many groups of children as possible at a time were seated two boys /two girls/one teacher for this experiment.

Method: This data was collected differently from the first two investigations because the cook, a very reliable person, recorded all requests for snack refills. Only children seated at two x two tables were included in that record.

As was the case in Experiment 2, sometimes the children volunteered to go for refills and sometimes they did not. The ultimate choice of child messenger rested with the teacher.

Results

As Table 7 indicates, once again there was considerable variation between children. Some children went for refills more frequently than others did.

As Table 8 indicates there were more episodes of boys (43) replenishing snack than episodes of girls (29) going on that errand, but an analysis by t-test (Table 9) indicated there was no statistically significant difference between the groups.

Discussion

Several findings concerning dominant sex role behavior are revealed by this study. At least in this small, middle class sample of teachers and children, teachers were clearly responding to boys differently than they were responding to girls in their functional use of language. They interrupted boys significantly less frequently during group conversation at the snack table than they did girls, thus enabling the boys to dominate the conversation. Boys and girls also responded differently when using interruptions. Boys consistently interrupted the teacher more frequently than the girls did, once again assuming a more dominant role.

TABLE 7

Number of Times Individual Children Got
Snack Refills During 24 Observations

Girls (N=11)		Boys (N=8)	
F 1	2	M 1	3
F 2	5	M 2	10
F 3	4	M 3	6
F 4	3	M 4	6
F 5	1	M 5	5
F 6	2	M 6	3
F 7	3	M 7	8
F 8	0	M 8	2
F 9	1		
F 10	6		
F 11	2		
	29		43

TABLE 8

Number of Times Boys and Girls Got Snack Refills During 24 Observed Episodes

Episode	Boys (N=8)	Girls (N=11)
1	1	0
2	2	2
3	2	0
4	2	1
5	2	0
6	2	2
7	2	0
8	3	1
9	1	0
10	4	3
11	1	2
12	2	2
13	1	1
14	1	2
15	1	1
16	1	2
17	2	1
18	3	2
19	1	1
20	2	2
21	0	1
22	2	1
23	2	0
24	3	2
	43	29

TABLE 9

t-Test Analysis of Frequency of Boys and Girls Getting Snacks

Number of Episodes	Gender	Mean	Standard Deviation	t	Degrees of Freedom	Probability
24	F	1.208	.883	-1.763	46.0	0.084
24	M	1.666	.916			

However, male dominance did not prevail in all social aspects of having snack together. Teachers were impartial when assigning the potentially sex role related behaviors of passing snack or getting refills. In those two situations neither boys nor girls held dominant positions.

Implications for children. What are the implications of these findings for the children involved? What are boys and girls learning from being interrupted more or less frequently?

Perhaps the answer to these questions in behavioral terms lies in the second set of findings that boys interrupted teachers more frequently than girls did. By age four, both sexes were exhibiting these differing styles in one aspect of conversational behavior.

Because that behavior is apparent in these relatively young children, does this imply that such male dominant behavior is inherent in the species, or are teachers (and other adults) playing a part in developing that style? Whether this more aggressive behavior by males and less aggressive behavior by females has biological origins as suggested by some data, (Frodi, Macaulay, and Thome, 1977; Maccoby and Jacklin, 1974), or is entirely the result of socio-cultural influences is impossible to deduce from this research. However, the study does provide evidence that the teachers were reinforcing that behavior by giving children subtle but consistent messages about what constitutes appropriate sex role behavior as they modelled submissive adult female behavior during conversation.

The teachers taught this message to the boys by interrupting less when the boys were talking. Moreover, they made no attempt to balance the larger number of interruptions boys made as compared to those made by girls by encouraging the girls to speak up, or suggesting that the boys make "space" for the girls to join in. Indeed, they seemed unaware

of that imbalance. Thus, the message about what constitutes appropriate male dominant behavior was made clear.

And what were the girls learning in this situation? They, too, were learning to know their place and what traditionally constitutes socially acceptable sex-role behavior for females in our society. As modeled by a wide variety of teachers, that role was to accept being interrupted more and also to interrupt less themselves when talking with males. In other words, the girls were learning to assume a less aggressive social role in conversation. It is quite possible since what they had to say was treated with less respect, they were also learning they were less important in the social scheme of things than were their male counterparts.

Implications for Teachers. The findings resulting from the second and third investigations about passing and getting snack though less dramatic are also of interest. They indicate there was no statistical difference in the frequency of behavior of either boys or girls in relation to passing snack or getting refills from the kitchen.

For teachers who are attempting to practice nonsexist teaching, this is encouraging information. Evidently the teachers in the study were not assigning hostess-type snack-passing duties to the girls or hunter-gatherer snack-getting duties to the boys. Where role assigning was done at the conscious level the data indicates that teachers were not favoring either sex.

At the unconscious level, however, the implications of this research are less encouraging. When the teachers were unaware of more subtle aspects of their behavior that involved how they were using language, they were still encouraging boys to be dominant and

girls to be more submissive. Moreover, this is not a case of male chauvinism, but rather an example, as my research assistant put it, of "women doing it to women!"

Unanswered questions. Whether teachers can learn to modify this response pattern remains one of several questions unanswered by this study. The results of the second and third investigations documenting the impartiality of those same teaches when more obvious opportunities to counteract bias occurred provides encouraging evidence that the teachers could be impartial when aware of their behavior.

Changing less conscious patterns of behavior, however, is more difficult than giving children equal chances to pass the snack basket or go for refills. Functional language patterns are so ingrained by adulthood that they are tenacious and difficult to modify. At present, effective strategies for changing them remain to be investigated. Certainly identifying the existence of these patterns of dominant/submissive language behavior is but the first step in that process.

Additional questions arising from this study include such tantalizing ones as, "Can we identify other language-related ways teachers foster dominant and submissive behavior in girls and boys?" "Do male teachers treat children in the same manner, or are there other cross-sex differences revealed in their patterns of conversation?" "Is aggressive behavior such a fundamental part of the biological inheritance of children that dominant/submissive language behaviors cannot be modified?" "Once teachers become aware of their own behavior that supports subtle and elusive patterns of dominance/submission in the functional use of language is it possible for them to change their conversational style?" And, finally, "If we could change teacher's behavior, would it make a significant difference in the

language behavior of the children, or would other influences, such as parents and the community, prevail?"

For those of us who wish to promote greater equality of opportunity for all children, these questions, and others like them, present intriguing possibilities for further investigation.

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